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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000470

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: NEW CORRECTIONS MINISTER TO TACKLE
DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

REF: A. TBILISI 255
[1](#)B. TBILISI 378

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance, Dimitri Shashkin, who oversees Georgia's penitentiary, probation, and legal aid programs (septel), is also charged with coordinating the President's democratic reform agenda with actors inside and outside the government. During a March 5 introductory meeting, Shashkin told the Ambassador that he intends to communicate these reforms through Georgian society and to western friends. With a small staff of five dedicated to democracy work, Shashkin plans to work with NGOs and society leaders to establish commissionson promoting democracy. He said that it is unlikely the non-parliamentary opposition will agree to work with him for a while -- probably no earlier than the end of May. The new minister claimed that communication within the administration is free-flowing, and dismissed allegations that a select few in Saakashvili's circle are controlling all governmental power. The Ambassador encouraged Shashkin and the GOG to make good on Saakashvili's pledges for democratization. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Shashkin, the former head of the Tbilisi International Republican Institute office, will play a central role in publicizing GOG democracy-building efforts to the international community. He repeatedly stressed that the government must improve its communication efforts in order to educate the international community, and also the Georgian public about its democratic reforms. Shashkin claimed President Saakashvili had given him a budget and free hand to run his ministry and implement democratic reforms throughout government and society. A contrary view, espoused by some in the opposition, posits that Shashkin was chosen as a panacea to Western criticism and a fix to an "image problem." The international community needs to keep the pressure on to push for further democratic reform in Georgia. End comment.

THE PLAN

[1](#)3. (C) Shashkin said that thus far, he had had only a limited discussion with opposition parties, primarily those in Parliament. Shashkin said that many of the non-Parliamentary opposition leaders "are prisoners of their own ambitions." They wanted to seize power at any cost, and have painted themselves in a corner by calling for Saakashvili's resignation. Consequently, with a small staff of five (including two advisors) dedicated to democracy work, Shashkin planned instead to work first with NGO and civil society leaders to establish commissions on promoting democracy. He wanted to initially create commissions on media reform, probation reform, and private property rights, among others. Shashkin said that by selecting a leader from an NGO or society to head each commission, he hoped to put a non-governmental voice in place as the "drivers" of the commissions. Under this scenario, critics would have to

answer to Georgian society rather than focusing on the government. Once these commissions were formed and operating, political parties would also be invited to participate.

NINO BURJANADZE

¶4. (U) The Ambassador and Shashkin discussed former Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze's current plans, including her calls for civil servants to protest against the government and her calls for street protests on April 9. Shashkin said that after the August war he was asked to tell Burjanadze that her political foundation would not receive money from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Shashkin then said that Burjanadze told him she had turned down \$1 million USD from Saakashvili, for her foundation, in expectation of NED support. He claimed the denial was devastating for her. Shashkin noted that despite numerous conversations, consultations, and weak polling numbers (in his former capacity as head of the International Republican Institute, IRI), it appeared that Burjanadze was having difficulty acknowledging her diminished public stature. Shashkin told the Ambassador that David Gamkrelidze and Burjanadze will not speak with him directly until after the April 9 protests -- as they see no need for discussion while calling for Saakashvili's resignation.

IRAKLI ALASANIA

¶5. (C) Shashkin noted that recent actions by former Ambassador to the United Nations Irakli Alasania (ref B) were equally puzzling. According to Shashkin, IRI had warned

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Alasania against joining forces with the Republicans and the New Rightists, given their marginalized position. Shashkin said that Alasania told IRI that Saakashvili had started the August war to intentionally thwart Alasania's earlier proposal that would have settled the Abkhaz problem.

APRIL 9 LOOMS

¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked Shashkin for his prediction about the protests planned for April 9. The Ambassador told Shashkin he has already urged all sides to approach April 9 with calm and to conduct the protests in a democratic manner. Shashkin said that the opposition stands to gain nothing during the protests, even if many people come out and stay for a week. Should anyone in the crowd instigate violence, Shashkin said the opposition would "get nothing." Shashkin said that in November of 2007, the government panicked and crushed the protests. He did not foresee such a scenario this time. Rather, he asked the Ambassador to reinforce the message that dialogue between all parties which value U.S. cooperation is in their mutual interests.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY, AND OPEN

¶7. (C) Returning to his key theme of communication, Shashkin said that there is open dialogue now between all of the ministries and President. He dismissed rumors that Bacho Akhalaia and the MOIA were trying to seize control of the Ministry of Defense and the rest of the power in government. Shashkin claimed the government was committed to an open, communicative process. It was his job to improve communication with Georgian society and with its international partners.

AMBASSADOR URGES SHASHKIN TO WALK THE WALK

¶8. (C) The Ambassador thanked Shashkin, and said he had shared a key message with others in the GOG, following his February consultations in Washington. The Ambassador said that many in Washington remain very concerned about the status of democracy in Georgia. Imedi TV, and more generally

freedom of the media, human rights, and intimidation of opposition figures are particularly troublesome issues. The Ambassador told the Minister that after five years in power, it was critical that the government take action and address issues such as the lack of a real plea bargaining system and alleged intimidation of opposition leaders by government forces.

19. (C) Shashkin argued that reports of intimidation were greatly inflated and were largely untrue, but acknowledged that the government needed to improve its efforts on these issues. The Ambassador urged Shashkin and the GOG to counter these suspicions of Georgian autocracy with more democratic and legal reforms.
TEFFT